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SUBJECT: KIGALI'S NEW MAYOR BANS MOTORCYCLE TAXIS

¶1. (U) Kigali city residents awoke on Monday, August 21 to an odd sight in central areas of the city: the complete absence of motorcycle taxis plying their trade on busy thoroughfares. The Kigali City Council, led by its new Mayor, Aisa Kirabo Kacyira, banned commercial motorcycles (termed "bodaboda") from the central core of the city on public safety and security grounds. The "bodaboda" operators, previously accustomed to nosing around all corners of the capital city, found themselves restricted to outlying suburbs.

¶2. (U) The devil-may-care attitude of many of the operators made their presence a constant nuisance on city streets, as they blithely ignored traffic regulations in zipping their customers to their destinations. However, they also provided the cheapest mode of transportation for many ordinary residents of their city. Their sudden absence from the streets, enforced by the National Police, created a crisis in low-cost transportation, as city buses and private mini-vans could not fill the void. Additionally, many motorcycle owner/operators reportedly risk losing their principal asset, as they suddenly have no income stream to make payments on their micro-credit-financed motorcycles. Some of these operators are demobilized soldiers, now without gainful employment.

¶3. (U) While municipal spokesmen sought to portray the ban as a reasoned response to traffic accidents and petty crime (with motorcycle purse-snatchings a common occurrence), city residents complied grudgingly. Local radio call-in shows recorded much grumbling and tales of woe, as poorer residents found themselves paying more for transport, or going without. Embassy staff reported household staff and security guards reporting late for work, as the workers either cued for scarce transport, or walked long distances. Many of the motorcycle operators are reportedly demobilized soldiers, who may have their own complaints as their new trade

¶4. (SBU) The Mayor in an August 29 meeting with emboff claimed extensive prior consultations with the motorcycle operator's union, as well as the ministries of Infrastructure, Internal Security, and Local Government. She stood by the decision, saying the city had recorded measurable and very heartening drops in both traffic accidents and petty crime. Acknowledging the strain the ban put on poorer residents, she said the city council hoped to reintroduce motorcycle taxis in ever-expanding areas of the city. She expected firm commitments from the commercial motorcyclists, she said, and proper plans in place for a more orderly operation of two-wheel taxis. Then they could begin to return to some of their usual city center routes.

¶5. (SBU) Comment. Despite the claims to extensive consultations, the motorcycle ban appeared to be put in place by the city with minimal prior announcement. Like earlier decisions to ban itinerant fruit marketers and close the

central market, the city government appeared to put orderliness above the needs of poorer residents. While crime and traffic are real concerns, this is a basically a safe and peaceful city. The ban on motorcycles makes life harder for those who can least afford to make alternate plans. End Comment.

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